"Not too Little to go to Hell": Literary Representations of Childhood in Seventeenth Century England

Antonella Cagnolati

Abstract

The paper[1] aims at analyzing the representations of childhood as they were proposed in children's books written by Puritan authors and preachers, and published in the second half of the XVIIth century. This literature can be considered as a mirror reflecting the different opinions about children English society worked out in this period. So the biographies of "little visible saints" portrayed in books well widespread amongst Puritans reveal us some interesting characteristics, such as the precocity these children showed in reading the Bible, in listening to the sermons, or the constant praying and meditating about religious matters. The different parts of their lives (birth, infancy, sickness and precocious death) are well narrated and investigated in order to detect the so called "marks of election", an important sign in Calvinist doctrine giving way to salvation in the afterlife. At the same time, their lives are testimonies of extraordinary virtues such as humility, obedience to parents and preachers, perseverance in attending the congregation, respect for the Holy Sabbath, and endurance of pain before death.

Children's literature and history

All literature, even the most transcendent, reflects the historical period in which it is written; this is almost a tautological concept. This is particularly true for children's literature, since the economic, social, cultural, and religious motives of the writers often dominated more than do the literary and artistic concerns. It is therefore really important to examine the historical setting of this literature, since literature for children offers us a detailed social landscape and tells much about the history of the period.

This is not to say that we can take what happens in children's literature as similar to history or even as history itself; literary documents are not like that. Children's books therefore cannot be considered primary

documents in the description of the way children lived. But in conjunction with other historical evidence, they can illuminate how children and adults acted toward each other, as well as what adults, parents in particular, thought children needed and wanted. Given the paucity of documents about children in any period, children's literature takes on an increased importance.[2]

Little godly books

My research presents an analysis of three children's books published in England in the second half of the XVIIth century, works which had particular significance in a period of English history that was marked by strong political and social conflicts which culminated, in 1660, in the Restoration and the return to the throne of the Stuarts in the person of Charles the Second. Before the Restoration, there had been few books aimed at children and adolescents: "courtesy books" such as *A Little Booke of Good Manners for Children*, an English translation of the work of Erasmus (1532), some books of riddles, manuals of rules for apprentices, and the so-called books "of parental advice" which were written by parents for their own children, although sometimes titles like *The Advice of a Father* or *A Dying Father's Living Legacy to his Loving Son* were just contrivances for publishing general manuals of good manners for the young.

Nevertheless, children had other choices of reading: Aesop's *Fables*, first published by William Caxton and even used as a schoolbook, gave rise to various collections of stories that had animals as main characters and were often illustrated with etchings, available in affordable editions and very popular with younger children. Their firm preferences, however, were for stories of fairies and spirits and above all for the ballads and tales of the "chapbooks", very cheap, popular publications that were sold on the street. In these books, besides the accounts of amazing feats and unusual pieces of news, there were also many popular versions of "romances" which fascinated young people with their adventurous fantastic stories of knights in armour. The low cost, easy access and deliberately simple language of these works meant that they could be read even by less-educated children. According to John Bunyan, this was just the kind of reading favoured by sinners. Recalling his own childhood before he was converted, he said that he had never taken the Bible into consideration, thinking of it as:

> a dead letter, a little ink and paper, of three or four shillings price. Alas, what is the Scripture, give me a ballad, a Newsbook, George on horseback, or Bevis of Southampton, give me some book that teaches curious arts, that tells old fables, but for the Holy Scripture I cared not.
>
> (Bunyan, 1980, I, 333)

While the voices of teachers were vehemently raised against the reading of "romances" (ever since the time of Roger Ascham, the famous teacher of Elizabeth the First), a very different book was considered to be suitable for the young: this was the great Protestant martyrology *Acts and Monuments*[3] by John Foxe, commonly known as the *Book of Martyrs*, which, ever since 1571, was to be found in all English churches as decreed by Elizabeth the First. With its crude illustrations, vivid dialogues and descriptions of the most horrendous tortures, it was bound to attract the attention of young readers.[4] A popular nursery-rhyme in the mid XVIIth century declared: "Look in the book of Martyrs and youle see/More by the Picture than the History."[5] Foxe had undoubtedly thought of children and adolescents as potential readers of his book and was addressing himself to them when he told exemplary tales of good and evil which had as main characters figures of their own age. A typical story is that of little Rose Allin Munt.[6] Denounced by the parish priest as a "dissenter", she fled from her village for a while and was captured by an official while she was going to get water for her sick mother. The official wanted to punish her as an example to others, so he burned the palms of her hands with a candle flame. The little girl suffered these tortures in silence with remarkable courage; in fact, she told the official to carry on torturing her, saying that the Lord would punish him one day for his cruelty, a prophesy which indeed was to be fulfilled. It is easy to see how this book made a strong impression on the eyes and ears of a child.

Puritanism and children: a complex relationship

With the development of Puritanism[7] during Elizabeth's reign, there came new and more urgent motives for the religious training of children in the minds of those who accepted Calvinist doctrine. The new attitudes were destined to have some extraordinary and often distressing effects on children. Calvinism taught that children were born with an inheritance of

sin and wickedness; consequently they were in the same danger of hell as the most hardened adult sinner. "We are the fruit of an unclean thing, are defiled in our very conception, and are by nature the Children of wrath… we are the Transgressors from the Womb, and go astray as soon as we are born," (Bunyan, 1980, VIII, 12) declared John Bunyan in *Instruction for the Ignorant*.

From this state they could only be saved by conviction of sin and personal conversion. For parents who accepted Calvinist views there was the greatest incentive to start the religious instruction at the first possible moment. Moreover godly parents were haunted by the unpleasant belief that "children are not too little to die, they are not too little to go to hell". (Janeway, I, A^4r.) Preachers advised that occasional instruction should begin with the child in the cradle, or while being dandled on the knees. Family worship, which the whole household, children servants and apprentices were expected to attend was an important religious duty, and so as soon as they could read, children were taught to study the Scripture and others pious books for themselves. As the fervour of Puritanism spread, the exhortations of the ministers to teach their children to read the Scriptures was a powerful incentive to all the classes to secure at least the rudiments of education for themselves and their children.

The "little godly books" were held to be an effective instrument for showing them the way to salvation. Tales of exemplary lives, manuals of good manners, doctrinal books and collections of simple verses and prayers easily learnt by heart, all written purposely for children, were thus combined with the educative work of parents, teachers and preachers. In particular, three books were important, for they mix education, good manners, and religious teachings: *The Compleat Scholler* written by John Vernon and published in 1666; *A Token for Children* published in two separate parts in 1671 and 1672, written by James Janeway; *A Little Book for Children and Youth* by Robert Russell, probably published in 1693. After a brief analysis of the three books, a particular concept of childhood will emerge. The authors of the "little godly books" intended them to be read – in a subordinate auxiliary role – together with the Bible and the catechism, guiding the little Christian reader along his spiritual path of meditation and prayer, showing him the straight and narrow way and accompanying him, with rules and restrictions, through the difficulties of daily life.

> My dear Child it is for thy sake, and for the sake of all little Children, that I made this Book; had it not been for you; I

> should scarce ever have endeavoured to have set forth any Books at all. Oh! I heartily wish that those Children, into whose hands this little Book shall come, would become God's Children; and O, it would be a joyful piece of work, if this little Book should be the occasion of bringing any Child to Heaven. (Russell, 1693, I, B^1v)

Awareness of their "miserable state by nature" was to be instilled in the tender minds of children as soon as they were able to understand what that meant, even by using rather forceful content aimed at arousing emotion, repentance, insecurity and terror. Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven: the four "final things" were the fundamental constant references of moral training in childhood. Conversion was to be early, in the youngest children: anxiety for their salvation, the dread of being called to judgment before having undertaken the path that would lead them out of sin (thus deserving to go to Hell), made it necessary to call the reader's attention to the possibility of an early death: "Did you never hear of a little Child that died? …...And what will you do then if you should be found like other naughty Children?" (Janeway, I, A^8v)

The second stage was to instil in the young the fear of judgement and eternal damnation, using examples from their daily life: Heaven is described as a place where the Christian child "shall never be beat any more, they shall never be sick, or in pain any more".(Janeway, I, A7r.) Russell points out that "thou shalt not need hunger or thirst, no more cold or nakedness, then thou shalt not need to fear any more peril or danger…" (Russell, I, A6r.) In the same way Hell "is a dreadful place, worse Ten thousands times than thy Parents beating thee". (Russell, I, A6r.)

Concerning the Day of Judgement, good children will be separated from bad children by a terrible, irrevocable sentence, often repeated in these books. This division is also to be hoped for and recommended here on earth: children are very frequently exhorted to keep away from bad company, to flee from the "children of the devil". Thus children are advised to have the same attitude as that adopted by Puritan adults, tending to separate, in terms of conduct, dress and language, the group of the 'visible saints' from the rest of society.

Little Caleb

The Compleat Scholler offers us a detailed picture of little Caleb Vernon; from the references that the book provides us with we may assume that the writer is his father John, a respected doctor, whose family is obliged to move house continually due to his religious beliefs. This work is in the form of a lengthy biography, to which are added various pages of poetry, elegies, epitaphs, anagrams and acrostics compiled by the main character's school friends or friends of the family, among whom appears Abraham Chear, author of well-known verses for children. In the second edition of this biography (which I have used), there are also three letters written by little Caleb himself.

The title page immediately reveals to us the intended readers of this little book: they are Caleb's peers, who must be led to the real knowledge of Jesus Christ in order to set out along the path of Godliness. In chronological order, *The Compleat Scholler* tells the life-story of the child, beginning with an explanation of his parents' choice of his name, a rather significant decision. (Vernon, 5) The biographer dwells on the appearance and temperament of the child: not very tall, excessively shy and afraid of everything and, although he does not want to admit it, with a tendency towards melancholy. His uncertain health and the continual frights caused by his father's enemies are added to the anxiety deriving from his "deep sense of sinfulness".

He is, however, a very intelligent child and like many other little "saints", keen to know the Scriptures; at the age of four he can read the Bible without problems and subsequently amazes his teachers with his exceptional progress in Greek and Latin. But in school that Caleb is troubled with scruples about reading pagan authors: should a good Christian, he wonders, read classical Greek and Latin works, or should he reject them utterly as being immoral? Moreover the teacher often reprimands him for an excessive use of Scriptural quotations in his English composition, so the school becomes a hostile place for the child. At the age of seven, having just recovered from a serious lung infection, Caleb sees his father being taken away by force from his own home and imprisoned "for the worship of God according to the Gospel of Christ" and Caleb is upset and frightened by the sight of the soldiers.

A serious epidemic of the plague breaks out, and the Vernon family moves to London, where John can work to help the sick. Caleb's health deteriorates and his mother begins to write down his words of repentance,

hope and edification. The lengthy story comes to life thanks to the precision of certain details emphasising the transformation of the child's character, as he displays considerable willpower before the members of the congregation, who have been called together to decide whether or not to allow Caleb the opportunity to undergo Baptism by being placed in the river. Having decided to take the risk and strongly determined to be admitted into the congregation, Caleb, becoming weaker and weaker, receives the sacrament in the arms of the minister who feels as if he is lifting "a parcel of dry bones". The story continues with the description of the various stages of the illness that leads Caleb into suffering and death. He is always patient and resigned; he prays and comforts the others around him, eventually dying in an exemplary manner. *The Compleat Scholler* differs from other Puritan biographies for children in the indisputable quality of its narration: Vernon effectively depicts the personality of the main character and the troubles of a family under great hardship, yet always strong and composed in adversity. He also clearly intends to leave a lasting record of the persecutions believers have undergone for keeping faith with the Gospel of Christ. The absolute authenticity of the story is made clear through the inclusion of realistic details.

Exemplary Biographies: *A Token for Children*

The most important well-known collection of biographies for children was *A Token for Children*. The thirteen stories contained in this book impressed, frightened and moved to tears several generations of children. For many of them who were seriously ill, the deaths described in the book became models to imitate. The story follows a common pattern of two distinct parts: the first begins at the moment of conversion and is limited to an account of the virtues and a description of the devotional practices of the main characters, sometimes accompanied by a description of short exemplary incidents and the faithful recording of significant phrases; the second part begins when the child is struck down by the illness that will lead to his death in a state of grace.

The "Godly children" continue to speak while "being dead" (*Heb. 11, 4)* because their biographer has not only told their life-story as an *exemplum ad gloriam Dei et aedificationem hominum*, but has devoted much attention to the words taken down "from their own lips" by reliable witnesses or else in the form of letters and notes. From being a sign of

godliness in life, the words of the main characters become, after their death, a means of converting readers. In these biographies, even from an early age, the children show clear signs of "visible sainthood". Awareness of their sinfulness often comes after hearing a sermon or reading an enlightening passage of the Bible. This "awakening" is followed by a deep sense of demoralization, which is marked by frequent bursting into tears during prayers and Scripture readings.

As has already been said, the lives of all the main characters in Puritan childhood biographies are prematurely ended by sickness. Sickness and death were constantly present in XVIIth century families: epidemics such as the plague, typhoid, smallpox, "sweating sickness" and various other kinds of infection due to lack of hygiene claimed a great number of victims each year, especially among children. Janeway does not always say precisely which illness has affected the main characters in his stories. He often merely uses expressions like "was taken sick", "fell sick", "was taken sick unto death", although in some cases the plague is specifically mentioned.

Much attention is devoted to an account of the spiritual and physical sufferings of the children and to a description of the heroic endurance with which all of them faced up to such sufferings. For each of them sickness is an ordeal sent by God which must be borne by following the example of Christ on the cross. Suffering and death often take on a theatrical aspect: from his bed the child prays, reproves and consoles others; around him, together with the whole family, there are neighbours and church ministers invited to comfort the dying child and to pray with him and for him. Those present ask the child questions which often sound cruel: "would you rather live or die?", "are you ready to die?", "how shall your sins be forgiven?", evidently with the aim of putting his faith to the test and hearing an indication of his resolve. Around the child's bed the Devil himself sometimes lurks, in a setting that recalls the illustrations of the *artes moriendi* and the terrible struggles of the saints against the Devil as told in hagiographies. In some death scenes there are even "divine raptures", "joyful ecstasies", visions of angels and of Heaven and prophecies about the exact time of the child's death.

Concerning the reliability of these stories, the biographer tries repeatedly to leave no doubts. Janeway often claims to have been a direct witness of what he recounts, or else to have read certain letters of God-fearing people who were with the dying child when he departed this earthly life. The precision with which certain dates and ages of the children

are given may be considered a further expedient to give the story greater credibility.

A Little Book for Children and Youth

The most complete and effective description of good children and bad children may be found in *A Little Book for Children and Youth*, which offers a vivid description of childhood at that time. In the preface the author declares himself to be seriously concerned as "Towns and Streets are filled with lewd wicked Children, they have been heard to curse and swear, […] so they are running fast to Hell" (Russell, A4r.). This book gives a vivid realistic portrait of the bad child and provides us with some unequivocal signs of wickedness:

> a wicked child is one that does not love Christ; …he cannot endure to learn any good thing; when his Mother calls him to his book, he runs away to play; …his school is bad as a prison to him; when his Master comes to call him forth, he cannot says his lesson; …after he left school, he loiters and plays about in the streets; …he comes home when it is completely dark. (Russell, 13-16)

At home he usually laughs and plays while his father reads the Bible to the family and also during prayers; instead of studying he involves his brothers and sisters in noisy violent games which end in their quarreling and using bad language with one another. In the end, the mother restores peace by means of a sound thrashing. The behaviour of the "bad child" comprised everything that could be offensive according to Puritan moralists. In a symmetry that evokes the traditional juxtaposition of vice and virtue, diametrically opposite attitudes are attributed to the "good child", which are those illustrated in the stories of exemplary children, proper icons of virtue.

Russell has no doubts about the possibility of wicked behaviour being changed, but the child must make up his mind not to swear, not to lie, not to say bad words and not to play on the Lord's Day; he must pray, learn his book and his catechism and obey his parents. Only then will he be able to become "God's child", bearing the signs of his resolve. These strict rules are often repeated, in kind affectionate language, in prose, verse or simple

sayings and proverbs. Russell even gets to the point of drawing up a table of virtuous behaviour, with a few points which distinguish the children of God from the children of the Devil. These are important as they draw a firm line between those who will burn in Hell and those who will go to Heaven. These features help us to further understand what kind of ethics was used to assess childhood as well as the conception of childhood itself that Puritan culture had developed.

The good child is the one who loves God and Jesus and never says a word that might offend the Lord, who prays frequently and flees from the company of wicked children; he goes willingly to school, loves his book, is diligent in learning his lessons and uses every free moment of his day to study and read the Bible. This child honours his parents and obeys them, behaves well in church, pays attention to the sermon and has holy respect for the minister of the congregation and the preacher of God's word. Lastly, he keeps the Lord's Day holy both in church ("hearing the Word of God") and at home ("in reading, praying and studying his Catechism").

Why was it felt so necessary to insist with children on the condemnation of vice and the exaltation of virtue? What reward would they gain through their impeccable conduct? I will answer these questions and finish my paper with the very clear words used by Russell: "If you art a Child of God, at last shall go to Heaven, there to sing, rejoyce and triumph among glorious Saints and Angels for ever and ever". (Russell, 12) This, then, was the prophetic vision of the future which was to unfold before the innocent eyes of good children.

Notes

[1] This paper was presented at the International Conference *Childhood in its Time: The Child in British Literature*, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK, 28-29 March 2009.

[2] Children's literature can be assumed both as a mirror, reflecting the opinions adults had on childhood, and as a scheme of behaviour, telling in the simplest way what children had to do, which moral dangers they had to escape from.

[3] For a deep analysis of Foxe's *Book* (Mozley 1940), see Haller 1963; Loades 1997.

[4] See the remembrance of Lord Macauley, who in 1852 found the first edition of Foxe's *Book* in the church of Cheddar "in tatters, thumbed

to pieces…but I could make out the account of Tyndal, and some prints of burnings", Trevelyan 1908. 570-572.

[5] The verses can be found in the poetry "In defence of the decent Ornaments of Christ Church, Oxon, occasioned by a Banbury brother, who called them Idolatries", in Wright 1656.

[6] Foxe 1563. 1898-1899.

[7] On Puritanism, see Collinson, Haller, Morgan, Schuking.

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Antonella Cagnolati is Associated Professor of History of Education in the Faculty of Education in the University of Foggia. She took her PhD in 'History of European Culture from XIII to XVIIth century'. In past years she taught in the universities of Ferrara, Bologna, Rimini, Urbino. She also teaches gender and women's studies in master's and post degree courses in Ferrara, Naples and Florence. Her researches are focused on models of behaviour for Puritan women and books for children in XVI-XVIIth century England, on educational practices in Tudor and Stuart England; on the educational theories of Jan Amos Komenský, his intellectual relations across Europe, and the diffusion of his pedagogy in England during the XVIIth century. Besides many articles in educational journals, she has published *Il Circolo di Hartlib: riforme educative e diffusione del sapere (Inghilterra 1630-1660)* (Bologna, 2001); *L'educazione femminile nell'Inghilterra del XVII secolo. Il* Saggio per far rivivere l'antica educazione delle gentildonne *di Bathsua Makin* (Milano, 2002); *Lo specchio delle virtù. Modelli femminili nell'Inghilterra puritana* (Roma, 2004); she is editor of *Tra negazione e soggettività. Per una rilettura del corpo femminile nella storia dell'educazione* (Milano, 2007), e *Tra Natura e Cultura. Profili di donne nella storia dell'educazione* (Roma, 2008). She is Chief editor of the series "Donne nel Novecento" (Women in XXth Century) for the publishing house Aracne (Roma).